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MAINE VOICES

Iraq: Where do we go from here?

As violence fuels fears that the war is a quagmire, part of the solution is making U.S. intentions more clear.

The news from Iraq most of this year has been a steady stream of death and disappointment. Although some blame the media for not telling the good news about "progress" in Iraq, the deadly attacks are growing in number and sophistication.

The success of Iraq's Jan. 30 elections was a bright spot, but the pace of insurgent attacks soon quickened, with about 70 attacks a day, as of May.

Almost 1,800 Americans have been killed, the vast majority since President Bush declared the end of major hostilities and "mission accomplished."

This year insurgents have increasingly targeted Iraqi civilians and security forces. Since late April, insurgents have slaughtered 1,500 Iraqis.

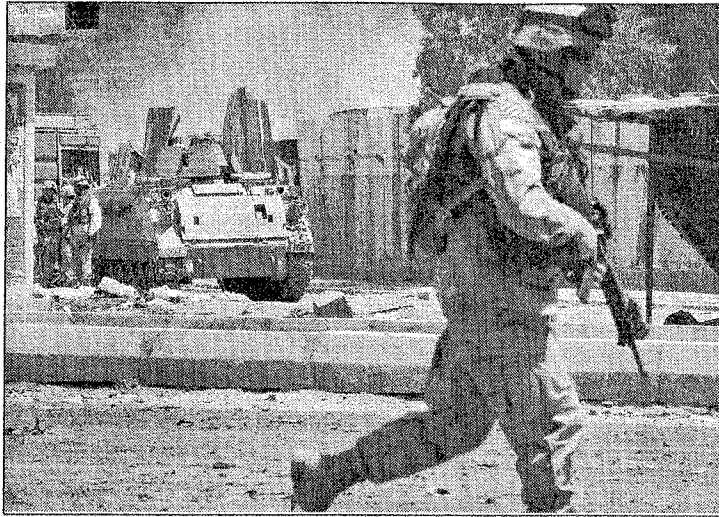
U.S. counter-insurgency efforts have had limited success, and the pace of rebuilding the war-ravaged nation has been severely hampered by the region's continuing insecurity, both from insurgents and from ordinary criminal acts.

Indeed, lawlessness has overtaken much of the country; since the Saddam Hussein government fell, crime has become the second leading cause of death, accounting for more than a third of civilians killed.

Americans, even those who supported the war at its start, are increasingly concerned that Iraq is a quagmire from which the administration has no coherent exit strategy.

Where do we go from here?

I believe that part of the solution is to make U.S. intentions



The Associated Press

U.S. troops secure an area in Baghdad after a recent car bomb attack on an American convoy. This year, there have been about 70 attacks a day by Iraqi insurgents.

crystal clear. A major (although not the sole) impetus for the insurgency is U.S. occupation of Iraq. Accordingly, I believe we need to dispel fears about American plans for Iraq.

I have introduced a bipartisan bill, the Iraq Sovereignty Promotion Act (HR 3142), that would affirm that it is U.S. policy not to maintain a long-term or permanent military presence in Iraq. Such a formal declaration would send an unambiguous signal to the Iraqi people that we fully support their efforts to establish democracy, exercise sovereignty and take full control of their security.

We would also reassure our allies, potential allies and a skeptical world that Iraqis ultimately will choose their own future.

The policy my bill promotes is consistent with administration statements. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, for example, testified to the Senate Armed Services Committee in February

that "we have no intention, at the present time, of putting permanent bases in Iraq." A few weeks ago, President Bush said U.S. troops would stay in Iraq "as long as we are needed, and not a day longer."

If this is U.S. policy, however, the administration and congressional leadership are loath to discuss it. When I offered an amendment (based on the language of HR 3142) to the Foreign Relations Authorization Act, House leaders refused to allow a vote on the House floor, demonstrating once again that they fear an open discussion of one of the most important issues facing our nation.

In contrast, the American people are eager to consider and discuss what we should do next in Iraq. When, on July 17 – a beautiful Sunday afternoon – I sponsored a public forum, hundreds of Mainers showed up at Portland High School to engage in a spirited, diverse debate on U.S. policy

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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toward Iraq. This is the kind of discussion that our foreign policy architects should encourage, not avoid.

Many people who spoke at my forum urged immediate U.S. troop withdrawal. I understand and sympathize with their view; however, I believe withdrawal of our troops before an Iraqi constitution is written and a government elected would probably lead Iraq down the path to civil war.

This would create even greater hardships for innocent Iraqi civilians, stir regional instability and undermine our own security. Any withdrawal plan must take into account the safety of Iraqi security forces and the Iraqi people, as well as our own troops.

Neither we nor the Iraqis can afford delay. An elected government must be in place in a matter of months, not years.

Many mistakes have been made with respect to the planning and conduct of the invasion and occupation of Iraq. We need to understand those mistakes, not dismiss them, in order to make better judgments in the future.

As Rick Barton – a foreign policy expert who spoke at my Iraq forum – noted, our options are increasingly limited. It is, he said, like a chess game where most of the pieces have been lost. We must make the best of a bad situation by moving the remaining pieces as skillfully and wisely as possible.

– Special to the Press Herald